

# Gallows humour, quirks and barfing

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On 14 October, one part of Gallery Chemould transformed into a bedroom for the viewer to walk into memory. To be precise, we walked into artist Dhruvi Acharya's memories. To begin with, everything in the room, from the bed to the dresser to the bookshelf, is made of white cloth—the floor and the ceiling are covered with cloth too.

The soft sculptural bed has a layered fabric bedspread on which the artist has painstakingly drawn memories of her marital life—including her late film-maker husband Manish, and her children. One side of the bed is strewn with large, triangular thorns, at once comical and poignant. The bookshelf features titles such as "Memory", "Desire", "Loss" that the artist has sown on to fat cloth books. Over 2,000 pen and pencil drawings made by the artist cover the walls of the bedroom—the installation evokes over 20 years of her memories: her painterly journey, her love, her loss.

For the 44-year-old Mumbai-based artist, however, personal loss is also an entry point to examine the issue of death and loss and, more significantly, come to terms with both.

"There are so many explanations about the timing and nature of death: It is based on your karma, or it is your destiny, or it is God's will," Acharya says. "All religions offer their own explanation to help believers deal with it—but I couldn't understand death from any of these positions. Most of the work in the show is



Dhruvi Acharya in her studio.

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based on my experience of trying to understand death and to come to terms with it."

Several of Acharya's works, whether paint on canvas or ink or watercolour on paper, present the realm of the private. The city intrudes and engages with the women in the works (almost all her works are centred around figures of women) but, ultimately, it is the mental and emotional landscape that Acharya seeks to delve into. This was true even of her last solo exhibition, held in New York in 2010. The genesis, admits the artist, lies in experiences that make their way into the visual journals that she maintains assiduously. Yet, by the time Acharya transposes her reflections on to the canvas, she attains a critical and emotional distance from them. Quirkiness and humour abound, and nothing about the subject seems didactic.

In the latest exhibition titled *After The Fall*, however, emotional trauma is the bedrock from which the works have emerged. In paintings like *Departure*, *Hibernate* and *Missing*, the female figures are

rendered in far greater detail than earlier; some are prone, some bleed, some try unsuccessfully to hide from prying eyes. The woman on the canvases of *Barf* and *Scream* has a look that says "tell-me-what's-new", even as she vomits in one and wears the mask of a scream drawn over it, in the other. The quirkiness is retained, but the humour is a few shades darker than Acharya's earlier works.

If anything, by evoking death, loss and the abundance of memory repeatedly, the works—when seen together—end up demystifying death. No longer does it seem to be outside the realm of human understanding, but through the myriad ways in which Acharya renders loss on paper, death finally becomes something that can be pinned down and examined, one human experience at a time.

After *The Fall* is on till 19 November, 11am-7pm (Sundays closed), at Gallery Chemould Prescott Road, Fort, Mumbai. Prices range from Rs25,000 for works on paper to Rs60 lakh for large canvases.